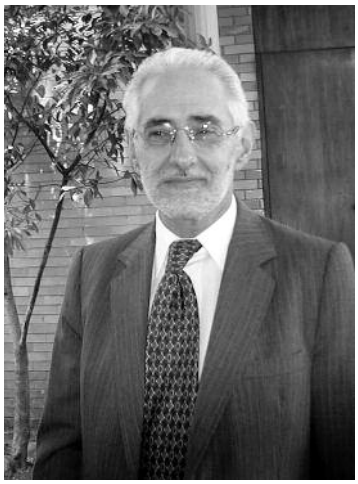
Queen Sofía Prize Awarded To UNAM Scientist



Courtesy of the Biomedical Research Institute, UNAM

A group of scientists headed by Dr. Antonio Velázquez Arellano was given the year 2000 Queen Sofía Prize for Research in Prevention of Deficiencies. The U.S.$30,000 award is given every two years to one group in Spain and another in Latin America in recognition of research aimed at better understanding and preventing harm to children caused by malnutrition and genetic conditions.

The Mexican group received the award for its work in the National Program for the Prevention of Infant Mental Deficiency in the area of screening at birth. Their work was done at the Nutritional Genetic Unit of the UNAM Biomedical Research Institute. The judges also awarded the prize to the work done in "Support for the development of infants born too small, too soon," at the 12 of October Hospital in Spain.

Queen Sofía gave Dr. Velázquez the prize last January personally in the Zarzuela Palace. It is very significant that she gave the group the prize in person because the award recipients began their work at the UNAM, which is commemorating the 450th anniversary of its establishment by royal decree by King Felipe II of Spain.

Dr. Velázquez began his struggle to implement the Program for the Prevention of Infant Mental Deficiency through screening at birth 28 years ago. The screening process consists of the analysis of a few drops of blood taken from the umbilical cord or the newborn's heel to detect early metabolic alterations, thus making it possible to treat them and avoid irreversible brain damage. Despite the program's being eliminated twice by public health officials, Dr. Velázquez never gave up. He was finally able to reinstate the program in Ministry of Health facilities in 1982 and six years later, the test became obligatory nationwide. Today, all public health institutions do this screening, benefitting 1,000 Mexican children born every year who would otherwise go untreated for mental deficiency.

Dr. Velázquez studied medicine at the UNAM and received his masters in science and a doctorate in human genetics from the University of Michigan. He is the founder of the Nutritional Genetics Unit, the coordinator of the UNAM Center for Genomic Medicine and a member of the Mexican Academy of Science and the Mexican Academy of Pediatrics. He has also received the Eduardo Liceaga Prize from the National Academy of Medicine, the GEN Prize for research on birth defects and the National Prize for Food Technology, among others.